

Vexed adults? Simone de Beauvoir's "One is not born a woman" and W.V. Quine

Simone de Beauvoir famously claimed "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." A recent book presents two interpretations of this claim (2021: 13-14). This handout arrives at a third interpretation, which is a bit "Fodoresque" I think. (Is it so far off-target though?)

A proposed analysis. The claim can be understood as a conjunction of two propositions: (a) one is not born woman; and (b) one becomes a woman. I anticipate an objector, call him McX, saying, "Well, I don't become a woman." Perhaps (a) means more fully, "No one is born a woman," and (b) means "If someone is now a woman, at some point this someone became a woman." Let us work with these clarifications.

An objection. I anticipate McX saying, "Then what she says is true, but trivially true, because a woman is just an adult human female," and "I don't deny the claim's truth, but I object to presenting it. It is not worth presenting."

An analytic truth? Analytic philosophers traditionally divide true propositions into two kinds: analytic truths, which are true merely in virtue of concepts involved ("A triangle has three sides," "A bachelor is an unmarried male person"); and synthetic truths, which are true not just in virtue of the concepts involved but also how the world is ("Some bachelors shop in supermarkets late at night"). A way of interpreting the objection is that it is claiming that de Beauvoir is presenting an analytic truth and most such truths are not worth presenting, in most contexts, and there is no reason to make an exception in this case. In short, "This is just an analytic truth."

Quine. Would de Beauvoir accept the objection on this interpretation? Well, W.V. Quine argues that: (i) attempted definitions of analytic truths do not survive close examination; (ii) when the evidence of the senses challenges one's system of beliefs (e.g. apparent evidence that no bachelors shop in supermarkets late at night), one has to make a change somewhere, but there are always multiple options as to where; (iii) these options include revising supposed analytic truths (e.g. "A bachelor is an unmarried male person"). Quine characterizes the situation given (ii) and (iii) as a kind of freedom. "There is much latitude of choice," he says (1951: 39).

Quine and de Beauvoir. Here is an idealized model: de Beauvoir is Quine inside-out. She begins with the fact that man is free, or persons are free; this leads her to a conception of how freedom is related to inquiry, according to which, when one's belief system is challenged, there are always multiple options regarding which beliefs to give up; this leads her to reject analytic truths. So my interpretation is that her claim does not look worth presenting but she planned to reject the objection "This is just an analytic truth" by means of the systematic defence just outlined, and then say, "Yes, there is discontent over presenting the claim, but there is no adequate clarification of this discontent." (By the way, a 1970 issue of the journal Quine published in includes an article arguing against "freedom from reason.")

References

- Quine, W.V. 1951. Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1): 20-43.
Singer, M. 1970. Freedom From Reason. *The Philosophical Review* 79 (2): 253-261.
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